

VZCZCXYZ0011
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHEG #5126 2290522
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 170522Z AUG 06
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0660
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 005126

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/17/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER EG SY LE

SUBJECT: SYRIAN PRESIDENT'S SPEECH BRUSHED OFF BY OFFICIAL SOURCES, ENDORSED ON THE STREET

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The vitriolic August 15 speech by Syrian President Bashar Asad before the Syrian Journalists Union, elicited a predictable mixed reaction from Egyptians, with official sources largely brushing off its significance, pro-government media sources lashing back, and the general public largely in agreement with Asad's attacks against Arab leaders, Israel, and the United States. One senior MFA contact confided that the foreign minister had received a detailed analysis of the speech August 16, but confirmed that there had not been any formal public reaction from senior GOE officials to the speech. Pro-government, and some independent media, blasted the speech in August 16 editorials, mocking Asad for his bravado and insisting that his words harmed Lebanon's interests. End summary.

¶2. (C) MFA Cabinet Staff Advisor on Lebanon and Syria, Nazih El Negeiry told poloff August 16 that he had just completed an analysis for the Minister of the August 15 speech by Syrian President Bashar Asad to the Syrian Journalists Union.

Reviewing the gist of his analysis, Negeiry noted the challenge involved in deciphering the high number of "messages" that Asad had sent in his speech to Arab neighbors, various Lebanese factions, Israel, and the U.S. among others. Asad, he felt, was looking to "remind us" that Syrian interests can not be ignored in ongoing diplomatic wrangling over the future of Lebanon and the region. "No one likes hearing such attacks and criticism," but such behavior is neither new, nor unexpected, Negeiry said. While Asad's words certainly registered on the street where support for Hezbollah and its leader remains particularly strong, Negeiry viewed the important thing as the "realities on the ground" in Lebanon. Hezbollah is weakened, the Lebanese armed forces are moving into the southern border area of Lebanon, and UNIFIL is being strengthened. Nevertheless, he warned against public statements that could "humiliate" Hezbollah, since public support in Egypt and elsewhere for the group was so palpable, and since Hezbollah's disarmament had to take place.

¶3. (U) Egypt's August 16 pro-government daily Al Gumhouriya responded to Asad's speech with disdain, warning Asad away from a "strategy of escalation" that would damage Syria's interests. The front-page unsigned editorial accused Asad of "getting high on someone else's victory" and of hypocritically seeking to take advantage of the destruction in Lebanon. Furthermore, the article stated, "behind closed doors, Syria says it does not support the resistance." Nor did Syria take action to liberate the Golan or even defend Lebanon from Israel earlier when Syrian troops were there. Lebanese, the editorial asserts, believe Syria seeks to start another civil war in Lebanon to pave the way for a Syrian return. At least one editorialist in opposition paper Al Wafd also criticized Asad for his "boastful statements" that

he asserts could lead to another civil war in Lebanon and to angry reactions from Arab capitals.

¶4. (SBU) Echoing popular sentiment among rank-and-file Egyptians, Muslim Brotherhood-dominated institutions such as the Egyptian Bar Association and MB Parliament members have been quick to endorse Asad's comments publicly and to repeat the major accusations that are leveled in his speech. Such comments are likely to find voice in Friday mosque sermons and other Islamist channels of communication.

RICCIARDONE